

Prospective Students Lack Interest in Online Learning

Publisher's Note

The role and value of technology in higher education is a widely discussed and debated topic. Higher education institutions have been trying to determine the best and most innovative uses of technology in the classroom. At the same time, financial sustainability has been an issue facing most colleges and universities nationwide. Many of those institutions have turned to technology and online courses in particular, to attempt to generate either cost savings or additional revenues or both – with mixed results. Faculty members and administrators have been wrestling with questions about the ways the quality of the student academic and intellectual experience is affected, for better or for worse, by increasing the role of technology in the classroom.

Online teaching and learning has been considered a panacea by some political and academic critics who question the sustainability of the current in-person model. But there has been sparse evidence about the demand for online learning experiences among traditional college-bound students. With this lack of market data in mind, Art & Science Group decided to explore the perceptions of traditional college-bound students about online learning.

The findings raise serious doubts about the market for online learning among traditional college-bound high schools students. It's been a prevalent assumption that technological disruption of higher education is happening quickly. On the supply-side, colleges and universities often think this is the efficient way to go. But given the lack of interest among traditional college-bound undergraduate students, institutions need to carefully consider the most suitable and effective way to employ online learning.

It is important to note that we did not survey non-traditional markets, such as working adults and continuing education markets for whom online learning may have much higher appeal. And we did not test nuances regarding individual programs or courses. Art & Science Group's research with clients has shown that market effects, including student demand, vary widely and are highly dependent upon the unique circumstances in each institution's marketplace.

The bottom line? If colleges and universities are considering using online learning as a cost-saving or marketing tool in the context of a traditional undergraduate education, they need to be careful about pitching online components to prospective students, introducing them to enrolled students, and justifying them as part of a high-quality education. While acknowledging that there may be biases in the timing of this sample that cannot be accounted for, it would appear at this moment in the technological evolution of higher education, prospective traditional undergraduates who responded to this survey have almost no interest in online learning and associate it with inferior academic quality.

Richard A. Hesel

Principal

Art & Science Group, LLC

Craig Goebel

Principal

Art & Science Group, LLC

David Strauss

Principal

Art & Science Group, LLC

Wayne Camara

Senior Vice President

ACT

Steve Kappler

Vice President, Brand Experience

ACT

1 Limited desire to take online courses among traditional college-bound undergraduate students



Findings

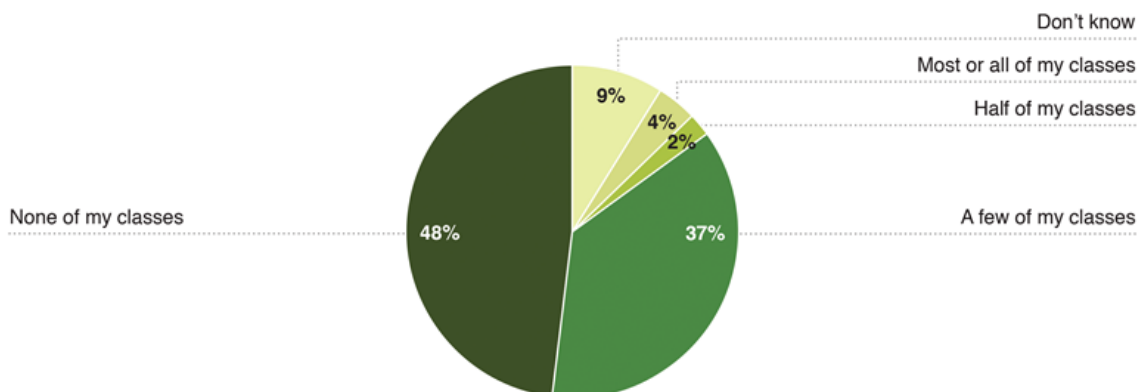
- When asked about their personal desire to take specific quantities of online courses, 48 percent of respondents said “none,” 37 percent said “a few,” 2 percent said “half,” and 4 percent said “most or all of my classes.” Nine percent said “don’t know.”

Commentary

Nearly half of all students surveyed indicated that they wanted to take none of their classes online, while about one-third expressed a desire to only take a few. These findings reveal that offering courses online will not be a successful strategy to attract traditional undergraduate students. In fact, it may engender market resistance. While demand has been present among adult and non-traditional students, who might be much better prepared and inclined toward online coursework, traditional college-bound undergraduates are generally not interested in it. In addition, there were no meaningful differences in interest level in the sub-groups we tested, including income, gender, and race/ethnicity.

CHART 1

Personal Desire to Take Online Courses



2 College-bound undergraduate students believe traditional brick-and-mortar classroom experience is superior; online learning inferior

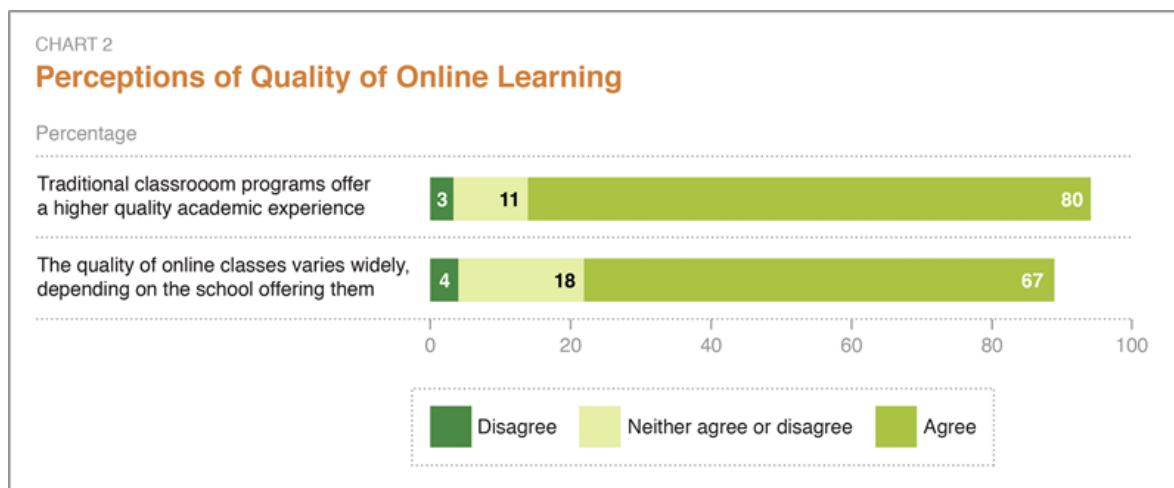


Findings

- 80 percent of respondents agreed that traditional classroom programs offer a higher quality academic experience. 11 percent neither agreed nor disagreed, and 3 percent disagreed.
- 67 percent of respondents agreed that the quality of online classes varies widely, depending on the school offering them. 18 percent neither agreed nor disagreed, and 4 percent disagreed.

Commentary

These students want a traditional college experience and will likely continue to want it. Close relationships with faculty matter, classroom discussion matters, and the unique experiences that accompany campus life matter. These preferences appear repeatedly in Art & Science Group's research, and the results of this survey reflect these preferences.



In a recent study Art & Science Group conducted for a liberal arts college, we tested the college's current offerings delivered in the familiar way (small classes, etc.) versus the current offerings plus many more course options with the latter delivered through virtual presence technology. Interestingly, when given the choice of "current offerings" versus "current offering plus many more online courses," the current offerings alone were significantly more popular among students.

A strong distinctive position – often driven by what is offered through traditional classrooms and bricks-and-mortar campus life – is what attracts prospective students of all backgrounds toward colleges and universities, not options that make college less expensive or more efficient.

Study Methodology



The findings in this issue of *studentPOLL* were based on a national sample of ACT test-takers who participated in the October 2014 or December 2014 national test dates, stratified to allow for an oversample of Black respondents (n=2,500) to compensate for anticipated lower response rates. Including the oversample, 42,500 emails were sent inviting participants to the online survey. Survey

responses were collected from February 9 to February 24, 2015 with 1,978 respondents beginning the survey; 75 disqualified because they were not the student who took the ACT; 407 disqualified because they do not plan to enroll in a full-time four-year degree program in Fall 2015; and 975 students completed the survey. Responses are weighted by gender, geographical region, and race and ethnicity data provided by ACT. Because of qualification criteria, such as intent to enroll in college, this sample of ACT test-takers is not representative of all ACT test-takers, but is designed to represent the demographic (race and ethnicity, gender, and geographical region) composition of the broader ACT test-taking population. The margin of sampling error for this population of students is plus or minus 3.1 percent. Margin of error is higher among subgroups.

About *studentPOLL*



A collaboration between ACT and Art & Science Group LLC, *studentPOLL* presents the results from a series of national surveys that measure the opinions, perceptions, and behavior of college-bound high school students and their parents. Published for the benefit of college and university senior leaders and enrollment officers as well as secondary school college counselors, *studentPOLL* seeks to provide insights and understanding that will result in better communication and service to college-bound students across the nation.

First published in 1995 by Art & Science Group, a leading national source of market intelligence for higher education, *studentPOLL* has become a trusted and widely-cited source of reliable data and insights on many critical questions concerning college choice. ACT and Art & Science Group have now joined forces to expand the depth and range of the issues that will be explored in *studentPOLL*.

studentPOLL findings and analysis are provided free on the [Art & Science Group](http://www.artsci.com) (www.artsci.com) web site.

About ACT and Art & Science Group



[ACT](http://www.act.org) (www.act.org) is a mission-driven, nonprofit organization dedicated to helping people achieve education and workplace success. Headquartered in Iowa City, Iowa, ACT is trusted as the nation's leader in college and career readiness, providing high-quality achievement assessments grounded in more than 50 years of research and experience. ACT offers a uniquely integrated continuum of solutions that help people succeed from elementary school through career, providing insights that unlock potential. To learn more about ACT, go to www.act.org.

Art & Science Group (www.artsci.com) is one of the nation's most influential consulting firms specializing in market-related issues facing higher education and the nonprofit sector. The firm's work synthesizes imagination and empirical rigor — art and science. Its research is considered the most rigorous and innovative in higher education today. The firm assists clients in every major arena of marketing and communications: market-informed strategic planning; enrollment management and student recruitment; development and alumni relations; tuition pricing and financial aid. The firm has extensive experience working with a large variety of public and private institutions of higher learning, ranging from comprehensive private and public research universities to small liberal arts colleges.

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